CR ConsumerReports®

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On Health

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ConsumerReports®

On Health

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Avoid Pesticides in Your Produce

CR's review reveals concerning amounts in some foods

PRODUCE CONTAINS many important nutrients. But the pesticides sometimes used on them may pose health risks. There's little conclusive evidence yet on low-level exposure, but some studies have found links between agricultural exposure and a higher risk of diabetes, some cancers, and Parkinson's disease.

We analyzed seven years of data from the Department of Agriculture, which tests a selection of produce annually for pesticide residues. We looked at 59 fruits and vegetables the agency had tested and found pesticides posed significant risks in 20 percent. Among them: bell peppers, blueberries, green beans, potatoes, and strawberries.

To help reduce your exposure:

› **Opt for low-risk produce.** For instance, eat snap peas instead of green beans.

› **Go organic when you can.** Almost all the organic produce tested had low or very low pesticide risk.

› **Be wary of some imported items.** While domestically grown and imported produce had roughly similar pesticide residues, seven imported foods—primarily from Mexico—posed a very high risk.

CR wants the Environmental Protection Agency to work more effectively with agricultural agencies in other countries, do a better job inspecting imported produce, and offer more support for organic farming and pesticide research. But banning two classes of pesticides (organophosphates and carbamates) from food crops may be most important. We don't need them, says Brian Ronholm, CR's director of food policy, because most U.S. produce is already grown without using risky pesticides. You can sign our petition at **CR.org/banpesticides**.

THIS MONTH'S EXPERTS

We contact health authorities and medical researchers from around the world. Here are some of the experts we consulted this month:

Lisanne Cruz, MD, rehabilitation medicine physician, The Mount Sinai Hospital, New York City.

Anandita Kulkarni, MD, cardiologist, Baylor Scott & White Health, Frisco, Texas.

Peter Loewen, PharmD, associate professor, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

Ilda Molloy, MD, hip specialist, Yale Medicine, New Haven, Conn.

Tonya Schoenfuss, PhD, adjunct associate professor of dairy products technology, University of Minnesota, St. Paul.

Aaron M. White, PhD, senior scientific advisor to the director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Bethesda, Md.

CORRECTION: *The article "6 Important Blood Tests," published in the February 2024 issue, said a complete blood count includes an assessment of kidney and liver function, thyroid function, and electrolyte levels. It does not. Those elements are part of a metabolic panel. See the corrected article online at* ***CR.org/bloodtests****.*

PHOTOS, COVER: GETTY IMAGES (4). PHOTO, THIS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES

Health Wire

How to Check Your Blood Sugar

If you have diabetes, don't rely on a smartwatch app that measures blood glucose without using a drop of blood, says the Food and Drug Administration. Instead, the agency says, stick with FDA-authorized products like meters that test a blood drop.

Source: U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Feb. 21, 2024.

DO THIS TO EASE PAIN

People who got 30 or more minutes of moderate exercise at least five days a week (or 75 weekly minutes of vigorous exercise) were 16 percent less likely to report pain than those who got less or none at all. This included cancer survivors, who reported that their pain-relief benefits were on a par with those of people who never had cancer.

Source: Cancer, Feb. 12, 2024.

MARIJUANA MAY HURT YOUR HEART

Regular cannabis use hiked the risk of a heart attack by 25 percent and stroke risk by 42 percent—compared with non-users—in a study of 434,104 U.S. adults. The risks were highest for daily cannabis users, but even occasional use increased the likelihood of heart attack and stroke.

Source: Journal of the American Heart Association, Feb. 28, 2024.

The Anti-Snoring Diet

People who ate more produce, whole grains, and nuts—and the least animal products and foods with added sugar and salt—were 17 percent less likely to report that they snored loudly or had sleep apnea, in a recent study. The researchers suspect plant-based foods may help by reducing inflammation and controlling body weight.

Source: ERJ Open Research, March 4, 2024.

Music's Big Mood Perks

Your favorite song may do more than get your toes tapping. Ninety-eight percent of those in a recent poll cite benefits from listening to or playing music. Among these: 75 percent said music relaxes them or eases stress, 65 percent said it improves mood, and 60 percent said it's energizing. A smaller percentage—31 percent—said music helps keep their mind sharp.

Source: University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging, February 2024.

Yoga for Brainpower

Women with memory problems who practiced a yoga-based breathing and meditation routine for 12 weeks reported more cognitive improvement than those who did memory-training exercises, a study found. On scans, the yoga group showed more connections in the brain area involved with memory and learning, and no loss of brain tissue (while the other group did). They also had less systemic inflammation. Yoga may help by reducing stress and increasing feelings of well-being, say the researchers.

Source: Translational Psychiatry, Feb. 14, 2024.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES (5)

Your Guide to Pain-Free Hips

The moves, meds, and other treatments you should know about

ACHY HIPS are all too common as the years pass. About 1 in 4 adults will have hip osteoarthritis by age 85, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The related pain and stiffness can make everyday activities like bending over to tie your shoes, getting up from a chair, and walking a challenge.

While OA is the most common issue, other conditions can also cause discomfort, says Claudette Lajam, MD, a professor of orthopedic surgery at NYU Langone Health in New York City. For instance, older adults are more likely to have weak hip muscles, which can lead to tendon wear and tear and inflame the lubricating tissue called bursae, says Carlo Milani, MD, a hip specialist at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City. Hip tendinosis (the thickening and degeneration of the tissues that connect muscle to bone around your hip joint) has a variety of potential causes, including overuse, underuse, hormonal changes, and injuries.

If you have hip pain that interferes with walking and your usual activities and doesn't improve after a few days, see your doctor, Lajam says. They can check for arthritis or issues like a fracture, determine whether the pain may actually be coming from your lower back, and advise you on treatments like the following.

Know the Right Moves

Exercise may not be appealing when your hips hurt, but, "movement is medicine," says Lisanne Cruz, MD, a rehabilitation medicine physician at The Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. "It keeps the muscles around your hip joints strong and increases blood flow to the area, which promotes healing and reduces stiffness."

A 2023 review published in the journal Osteoarthritis and Cartilage Open found that regular activity improved pain and function for people with hip OA.

With your doctor's okay, opt for low-impact activities such as walking and cycling. Swimming and water aerobics are also a good idea, says Ilda Molloy, MD, a hip specialist at Yale Medicine in New Haven, Conn., because the water reduces pressure on your hip joints. Activities that encourage flexibility and stretching, like gentle forms of yoga and tai chi, can be helpful too, she adds.

Consider Physical Therapy

If it's too difficult to do the activities above, a physical therapist can show you exercises to improve the range of motion in your hips and strengthen supporting muscles. Both take the strain off joints, which can ease OA pain, says Kristin Barker, DPT, a physical therapist at NYU Langone Health. A PT can also check for posture and gait problems and show you exercises for these.

Manage Your Weight

Being overweight or obese raises your risk of hip OA and, potentially, bursitis. "Losing just a few pounds can make a big difference in the amount of stress placed on a hip joint," Milani says. He also recommends a plant-based diet to help manage weight and reduce inflammation. A 2023 review published in the journal Nutrients found that a

ILLUSTRATIONS: SAM PEET

Mediterranean-style diet–rich in produce, fatty fish, beans, nuts and olive oil–can help ease OA-related pain and stiffness.

Consider Helpful Gadgets

If you limit walking because of pain, a cane (or, in some cases, a walker) can help take pressure off an achy hip, says Molloy. You can also try a hiking stick (aka a walking pole). Your PT can suggest other assistive equipment, like a grabber to pick up items from the floor. A heating pad can increase blood flow to stiff muscles and joints, and ice packs can ease inflammation.

Tweak Your Sleep Position

When you have a hip problem, it can be hard to get a good night's rest. If you're a side sleeper, Barker recommends lying on the hip that isn't painful and placing a pillow between your legs to take pressure off your hips. For sleeping on your back, put a pillow under your knees.

Use Meds Wisely

If you need additional relief or have a flare-up of pain, talk to your doctor about appropriate medications. While long-term use of a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, and generic) isn't recommended for older adults, taking one for a few days is usually fine with your doctor's okay, Molloy says. You can also try acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic). For OA, if you're still miserable, consider a prescription steroid injection, Milani says.

Is Hip Replacement for You?

For diagnosed OA, if you've tried the approaches previously mentioned for at least six months but still find activities like walking painful, it may be time to talk to your doctor about hip replacement, Molloy says. Research has found that older people have outcomes as good as younger ones but a slightly higher risk of complications. "If you're in your 70s or early 80s and are in poor health, it may not make sense," Milani says. "But if you're older and active and have longevity in your family, it might be something to consider."

You'll want a surgeon who does at least 25 such operations a year at a medical center where thousands are done annually. And ask if they perform the procedure through the anterior muscles on the front of your thigh, Cruz says. This speeds recovery by several weeks.

LEARN

For info on how to guard against hip fractures and other bone breaks, go to CR.org/fractures.

CAN DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS HELP?

Glucosamine and chondroitin supplements have been widely touted to relieve osteoarthritis pain. But studies have found conflicting results, says Lisanne Cruz, MD.

Turmeric supplements, however, show some promise, she says. Research suggests that the herb may help reduce the inflammation associated with OA (but not other hip conditions). A 2020 study published in the journal Phytotherapy Research, for example, found that people with knee OA who took a twice-daily supplement that contained turmeric, ginger, and black pepper reported relief from symptoms similar to those who took the over-the-counter pain reliever naproxen (Aleve and others).

If you want to try turmeric, Cruz recommends 1 to 2 grams daily. But it's a good idea to check with your doctor before you use it. For people who take blood thinners or have certain conditions, such as gallbladder or liver disease, it's not advised. For advice on what to look for when you're shopping for a supplement, go to **CR.org/supplementchoice**.

3 AT-HOME HIP EXERCISES THAT WORK

A few simple moves can improve the strength of your hips, says Kristin Barker, a physical therapist. She recommends doing two to three sets of eight to 12 repetitions of the following exercises every other day.

1. CHAIR STAND
Stand up from a chair without using your hands to push yourself up. "It activates your glutes and hamstrings, muscles you need for walking with long strides and climbing stairs," Barker says.

2. SIDEWAYS WALK
Face a kitchen counter (hold on if necessary) and take wide steps from side to side. This strengthens hip abductor muscles to improve stability. As you get stronger, you can add resistance bands.

3. THIGH SQUEEZE
Sitting at the edge of a chair, place a large rolled-up towel between your knees. Focus on squeezing it as you stand. This strengthens inner thigh muscles, which helps stabilize the pelvis.

Is Cottage Cheese Good for You?

Choose well and you'll get a big protein boost

COTTAGE CHEESE, a diet-food staple of the 1970s, has been riding a new wave of popularity over the past few years. You see it in the dairy case in single-serving cups and in new flavors with labels promoting ingredients like live active cultures and protein. Here's what to know about the benefits of cottage cheese.

Protein and Other Good Stuff

To make cottage cheese, an acid or acid-producing culture is added to milk (usually nonfat), which begins the process of separating the liquid whey protein from the milk solids, or curds. The curds, which are what give cottage cheese its lumpy appearance, are washed, and then cream and salt are added.

The resulting cheese is low in calories and rich in protein. A half-cup of full-fat (4%) plain cottage cheese has 116 calories, 14 grams of protein, 3 grams of saturated fat, and 99 mg of calcium (8 percent of the daily value). Low-fat cottage cheese (2%) will save you just 24 calories per half-cup and less than a gram of saturated fat.

The protein in cottage cheese makes it filling, so it may help in weight loss. For example, a small study published in 2015 in the journal Appetite found that cottage cheese suppressed hunger as much as eggs, which are considered one of the most filling foods.

Fruit-flavored cottage cheese can contain added sugars and is higher in calories than the plain varieties. A single-serving container of Hood's 4% cottage cheese with pineapple, for example, has 11 grams, nearly 3 teaspoons' worth.

Some cottage cheese can be a good source of live active cultures. These healthy bacteria can help with digestive and overall health. But unlike yogurt, the cultures aren't needed to make cottage cheese, so if you want them, be sure to check the labels.

The Sodium Surprise

Sodium is cottage cheese's one nutritional negative. Salt is added as a preservative because cottage cheese is high in moisture, says Tonya Schoenfuss, PhD, an adjunct associate professor of dairy products technology at the University of Minnesota. You can end up with as much as 450 mg of sodium per half-cup. (The daily sodium recommendation is less than 2,300 mg.) For example, a half-cup of Breakstone's 2% small curd 45% less sodium cottage cheese has 200 mg. There are no-salt-added options with as little as 45 mg in half a cup. These can taste bland, but you can perk them up with fruit, diced veggies, or spices and herbs such as cinnamon or dill.

Try It in These Dishes

With its mild flavor, cottage cheese can be a chameleon in the kitchen. Add it to smoothies, use it as a toast topper along with sweet or savory spices, or pair it with chopped tomato, cucumber, and bell pepper to turn a light salad into a satisfying meal. It can also be the base for a high-protein, healthier Alfredo pasta sauce; you can find many easy recipes online.

PHOTO: LIUDMILA CHERNETSKA/GETTY IMAGES

Yogurt vs. Cottage Cheese

Greek yogurt can be delicious and filling, but if you're tired of it, cottage cheese is much the same nutritionally. The biggest difference is in sodium count. If you choose lower-sodium options, you'll still get similar amounts of the other nutrients.

	2% COTTAGE CHEESE, 1/2 CUP	LOW-FAT GREEK YOGURT, 1/2 CUP
CALORIES	93	90
SATURATED FAT	1.4 g	1.5 g
PROTEIN	12 g	12 g
CALCIUM	116 mg	141 mg
SODIUM	363 mg	42 mg

Heal Your Heels

If they're achy, these steps can really help

BUNIONS, CORNS, and curled-up hammertoes are among the more obvious causes of foot pain. But when it comes to your heels—a source of discomfort for almost 10 percent of adults ages 50 and up—it may be less immediately clear.

"Older patients often write it off as just another inevitable side effect of aging or blame their heel pain on arthritis," says Stephanie Hook, DPM, executive director of the American Board of Podiatric Medicine. "But the typical area of pain is not at a joint, so arthritis is likely not the case." So why are your heels hurting? Below, common conditions and steps for relief.

Why Heels Hurt

Plantar fasciitis and Achilles tendinitis are two of the main reasons your heels might ache. The first is caused by excess pressure on the plantar fascia, which is a band of tissue that attaches the heel bone to the toes, and the second is caused by overuse of the Achilles tendon, which connects calf muscles to the heel bone. Both can bring heel pain after a rest (for example, when you first get out of bed) as well as after exercise.

"When the plantar fascia or the Achilles tendon becomes inflamed, it can be caused by an increase in activity, an increase in body weight, or from wearing old shoes, flat shoes, bad shoes, or no shoes," says Jacqueline Sutera, DPM, a podiatrist in New York City.

And for older adults in particular, heels might hurt as a result of what's known as fat pad atrophy. This condition occurs when the protective fat pad on the bottom of the heel and the ball of the foot thins, which leaves the heel bone with less of its natural cushioning. "The heels absorb the majority of the impact every time your foot hits the ground," Hook says. "So as the fat pad starts to decrease, heel pain can increase."

What You Can Do

If heel pain comes on suddenly and is severe, alert your doctor to make sure it's not something that needs immediate attention, such as torn tendon. Otherwise:

› **Do stretches that soothe.** Stretching the calf and Achilles tendon a few times throughout the day can help alleviate plantar fasciitis and Achilles tendinitis discomfort. Because pain is often worst first thing in the morning, it's helpful to do this calf stretch before you even get out of bed: Place a towel, belt, or strap around the ball of the affected foot. With your leg straight, gently pull your toes toward you and hold for 15 seconds.

› **Rub away pain.** To ease plantar fasciitis, roll a ball, such as a golf ball, up and down the arch of the foot and along the sides to help loosen tight tissues. Rolling a frozen water bottle under your arch for 10 to 15 minutes a few times a day will also help.

› **Assess your footwear.** It's key that shoes are in good condition and offer arch support. Otherwise, they may "cause strain on the plantar fascia and the Achilles," Sutera says. For any kind of heel pain, skip going barefoot, even around the house, and choose footwear that has some cushioning, a slightly raised heel, a wide toe box, and a deep heel cup that hugs your heel and helps stabilize the foot. And make sure you're wearing the right shoes for the activity you're doing. For pickleball, for instance, you'll want sneakers made for racket sports, which offer support for the side-to-side motion of the game. Walking sneakers are meant for forward motion only.

› **Use the right insoles.** To make footwear more comfortable for plantar fasciitis or Achilles tendinitis, try drugstore insoles with good arch support. If you think a thin fat pad is the culprit, a cushioning insole with a cupped heel is best. "That squeezes your heel gently and holds it in place to help optimize whatever is left of your fat pad," Sutera says.

› **Switch up activity.** If something you're doing seems to worsen pain (this typically involves impact, like walking, jogging, or a racket sport), give it a rest. Try an activity that's easier on your heels, like swimming, riding a stationary bike, or water aerobics.

Know When to Get More Help

If your heel pain hasn't subsided after two weeks of diligent self-care, it's time to see a podiatrist. Custom orthotics can add arch support and heel padding to your shoes. A podiatrist (or physical therapist) can show you how to tape your heel to compensate for fat pad loss, Sutera says. Cortisone injections can help relieve severe heel pain from inflammation on the plantar fascia.

LEARN

For more on how to handle foot pain, go to CR.org/footpain.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

What You Must Know About Alcohol

Drinking offers no health benefits, and it may cause more problems than previously thought

FOR MANY, having a beer, a glass of wine, or a cocktail is a pleasant way to unwind after a busy day, celebrate a happy event, or enjoy a meal. And why not? Most of us have heard over the years that alcohol is good for our hearts and can prolong our lives. But recent research has called alcohol's benefits into question and found that health risks can occur at less than one drink a day. Even red wine has lost its heart-health halo. After correcting for research bias in studies, it turns out "it's the wine drinkers who are healthier rather than the wine," says Aaron M. White, PhD, senior scientific advisor to the director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Does all this mean you should give up alcohol altogether? Not necessarily. While large population studies can suggest associations between alcohol and health risks, they can't determine the effect drinking will have on an individual. But knowing the latest expert thinking and research on alcohol's effects can help you determine what's right for you.

How does alcohol affect health?

For starters, whether it's wine, beer, or spirits, alcohol is unlikely to boost heart health. According to a 2022 report from the World Heart Federation, "research in the latest decade has led to major reversals in the perception of alcohol in relation to health in general and CVD [cardiovascular disease] in particular." A 2018 analysis of 83 studies published in The Lancet found that people who drank five to six glasses of wine or pints of beer per week had an increased risk of stroke, heart disease, heart failure, and other forms of cardiovascular disease. And a 2023 analysis of studies published in the journal Hypertension linked drinking any amount of alcohol to a rise in blood pressure over five years, even in those who had normal blood pressure.

Alcohol is linked with at least seven different types of cancer, including common ones like bowel and breast cancers, according to the World Health Organization. The risk begins to rise with the first drink, the WHO has noted, leading it to conclude that "no level of alcohol consumption is safe for our health."

As for longevity, a high-quality review published in spring 2023 in the journal JAMA Network Open, which examined the health and drinking habits of nearly

HOW TO DRINK MORE SAFELY

HAVE ONE, NOT TWO
When you drink, limit yourself to one beer, glass of wine, or cocktail.

SELECT BEVERAGES WITH LESS ALCOHOL
Typically, beer is 5 percent alcohol by volume (ABV), wine is 12 percent, and liquor (such as whiskey or vodka) is 40 percent. But the percentages can vary a lot—a Moscato d'Asti, for example, is about 5 percent alcohol, while a California chardonnay can be 14 percent. Check labels for ABV and pick ones with lower percentages.

5 million people, concluded that having even small amounts of alcohol doesn't help you live longer. "The risk of mortality increases the moment you start drinking, and there's no little dip for the moderate drinkers," says study author Tim Stockwell, PhD, a professor in the department of psychology at the University of Victoria in British Columbia.

Does alcohol affect older people more?

"In general, the risks of harm from alcohol increase as we age," White says. Here are some of the reasons:

- The amount of water relative to fat in the body declines with age, contributing to higher blood alcohol concentrations, so an alcoholic drink can have more of an impact.
- Balance and coordination decrease with age, making you more susceptible to falls, the leading cause of injury-related death among adults ages 65 and older. And drinking is a factor in 65 percent of fatal falls.
- Reaction time, memory, and driving performance are all more impaired in older drinkers.
- A large percentage of older adults already have problems sleeping, and drinking can exacerbate them by causing less restful and shorter sleep, says White.
- Inflammation increases in the body with age; chronic overindulging in alcohol may ratchet up inflammation and weaken the body's ability to fight infections like COVID-19.

How many drinks are too many?

One drink is 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1½ ounces (about a shot) of 80-proof spirits. If you drink lightly to moderately—no more than one daily drink for women or two daily drinks for men—the risk to your health is believed to be low. But keep in mind that the more you drink, the more your risk increases, Stockwell says, and not just in a linear fashion—it actually accelerates.

Cutting back from three or more alcoholic drinks a day can significantly lower blood pressure in people with and without hypertension.

One way to put your risk into perspective is to consider your personal pros and cons. A "pro" might be how much you enjoy a cocktail before dinner or a glass of wine at a party with friends, or how an alcoholic beverage relaxes you. Cons might be factors that increase your susceptibility to alcohol's potential harmful effects. In addition to age, they include the following.

- **Sex:** Women's bodies are more sensitive than men's to alcohol's harmful effects in both the short and long term.
- **Medical conditions:** Drinking can make it harder to manage high blood pressure and diabetes, for example.
- **Family history:** You may want to be more cautious if there's alcoholism, cancer, or heart disease in your family tree.
- **Prescription or over-the-counter drugs you take:** Combining alcohol with aspirin, acetaminophen, NSAIDs, sleeping pills, or medicines for anxiety or depression, for example, can be dangerous; check your meds with a pharmacist or your doctor.

If you're healthy overall, the risks of moderate drinking may be acceptable. Or, if you tally up a lot of cons for alcohol but don't want to give it up, you can work on consuming less—see "How to Drink More Safely," below.

Is it okay to have three drinks on one day instead of one on three days?

No, because the more alcohol your body has to process in one drinking session, the greater the effect on the heart and liver, among other organs. It's best to stick with one or two drinks daily or less, depending on your sex.

Will changing my drinking habits now really help my health?

It could. A 2017 analysis of 36 studies in The Lancet Public Health found that cutting back from three or more alcoholic beverages a day can significantly lower blood pressure in people with and without hypertension in two years or less. And in a 2020 study in the New England Journal of Medicine, abstaining even for just a few months was found to reduce the occurrence of heart arrhythmias in drinkers who had atrial fibrillation, a common heart rhythm disorder that's more prevalent in people over 60. Also, having less alcohol may help you lose weight and improve your sleep and energy levels. "It's absolutely not too late to cut back," White says.

LEARN

Check out the best nonalcoholic beers from CR's evaluation at CR.org/noalcoholbeer.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

USE SMALLER GLASSES

The larger the wineglass, the larger the pour, one study in the journal BMJ found. Use a measuring cup or shot glass.

SLOW YOURSELF DOWN

Have a nonalcoholic beverage after every alcoholic one, especially when you're socializing (and less likely to focus on the number of drinks you're putting away).

TRACK YOUR INTAKE

Paying attention to your drinking can help you reduce it—just like tracking your food intake on a diet can help you eat less, says Katie Witkiewitz, PhD, director of the Center on Alcohol, Substance Use and Addictions at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

Important News About Blood Thinners

With more options than ever, taking the right one is key. Here's what to consider.

BLOOD THINNERS are one of the most common medications for adults ages 65 and older. They're used to prevent the blood clots that can cause strokes or heart attacks in people with heart disease, atrial fibrillation, heart valve replacements, or a history of deep vein thrombosis.

There are now several effective options, including the old standby warfarin (Coumadin and generic), which was first approved 70 years ago. Newer direct oral anticoagulants (DOACs) include apixaban (Eliquis)–which has now eclipsed warfarin in popularity–as well as dabigatran (Pradaxa) and rivaroxaban (Xarelto).

Which Is Right for You?

In general, there are not many significant differences among the DOACs currently on the market, says Peter Loewen, PharmD, an associate professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. As a group, DOACs are considered safer and more effective than warfarin, but missing a single dose of a DOAC can be dangerous. And some require twice-daily rather than once-daily pills. Here are a few other key factors:

- **Blood test tolerance.** Unlike DOACs, warfarin requires regular testing to calibrate correct dosing, as often as daily at first and then at least every few months.
- **Diet.** People taking warfarin have to limit or avoid foods that can increase the risk of bleeding–such as alcohol, grapefruit juice, and cranberry juice–and eat consistent amounts of vitamin-K-rich foods such as leafy greens, brussels sprouts, broccoli, and green tea.
- **Side effects.** These can vary quite a bit by individual, but dabigatran, for example, is known to cause more nausea than other options, says Loewen.
- **Cost.** DOACs are still available only by brand name, says Anandita Kulkarni, MD, a cardiologist at Baylor Scott & White Health in Frisco, Texas, and a member of the American College of Cardiology's Prevention Council. So the out-of-pocket cost for Eliquis is about $75 per month, compared with about $5 for warfarin.

What a Switch Entails

A March 2023 review of more than 100 studies found that overall, people who switched from warfarin to a DOAC had higher satisfaction with their treatment, in part due to the drop in testing that comes with a switch. But 5 to 21 percent of people who moved to a DOAC went back to warfarin, citing reasons such as cost or missing the testing–which certain people may find reassuring. "There are some patients who like knowing how well the drug is working," says Daniel T. Abazia, PharmD, a clinical associate professor at the Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy at Rutgers University in Piscataway, N.J.

Because DOACs work more quickly than warfarin, changing to one of the newer meds is often simpler, says Abazia. Going back onto warfarin, however, may require having some overlapping prescriptions while your doctor waits to see that the warfarin is working.

Medically, the switch from warfarin to DOACs is often seamless, Kulkarni says, though some people may experience issues paying for their new prescription. And though a switch may not increase the risk of a bleeding event for most people, it seems to for some: A 2024 study published in Circulation found an increased risk of bleeding in those with atrial fibrillation who are frail and 75 and older. People should contact their doctor right away if they notice any unusual bleeding (such as a sudden nosebleed), Abazia says. This would suggest the dose of your new blood thinner might need to be adjusted.

Most important, says Loewen: When prescribed any blood thinner, take it regularly and as prescribed.

LEARN

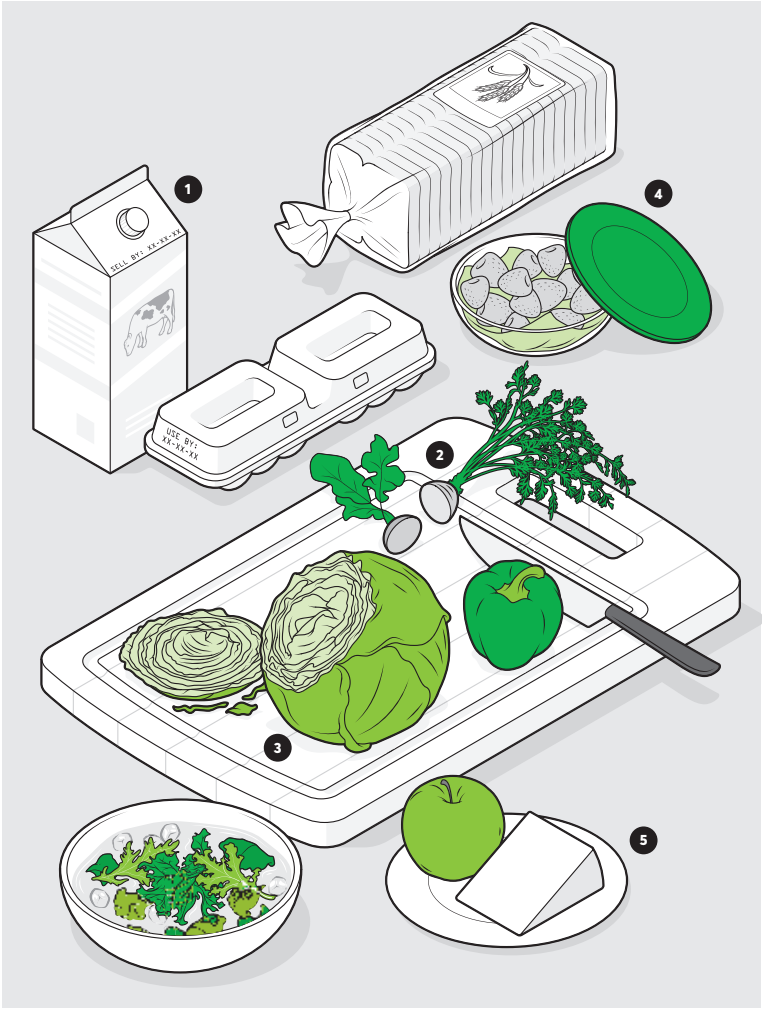
For more on keeping your heart healthy, see CR.org/heartguide.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Make Food Last Longer

These simple storage tips will keep everything fresher

PERHAPS THAT FRESH fruit you bought a few days ago developed soft, mushy spots a lot faster than you expected. Or your favorite cheese was accidentally hidden behind other items in the fridge and now has specks of mold. Many of us end up throwing out more groceries than we'd like to. But a few smart steps can reduce the amount that goes into the garbage. These tips, from nutrition experts including Amy Keating, CR's registered dietitian, will help you waste less food.



1 BE SMART ABOUT "BEST BY" LABELS

With the exception of infant formula, "use by," "best by," and similar dates on labels don't mean it's time to throw away unopened food. Instead, they indicate that a product will be at its peak of freshness on or before that day. But use your judgment to determine whether something still looks and smells okay.

2 USE ALL THE LITTLE BITS

Some parts of veggies you'd usually just toss—like the tops of beets, carrots, and turnips—can be sautéed or used in salads. You can also use broccoli stalks for soup. Celery leaves can likewise be added to soups and other dishes. (Cook the tough darker green outer leaves; the more tender inner leaves are tasty raw.) Still other veggie ends, peels, and stems; chicken, pork, or beef bones; and shrimp shells can be frozen and used to make stock.

3 CHOP A LITTLE AT A TIME

When you buy certain large produce items, such as a cabbage or a melon, it's best not to chop it up all at once unless you're going to use it right away. With fruits and vegetables, chopping increases the surface area that's exposed to the air. This could shorten its shelf life. (That's one reason precut produce from a store tends to spoil faster than whole.) Instead, cut up only as much as you need at the time.

4 EXTEND THE LIFE OF FOOD

Fresh berries can spoil very fast. To keep them fresher longer, store them in a covered dish with a layer of paper towel on the bottom. Don't wash berries—or any produce—before storing them in the fridge because the added moisture can encourage mold. Have an overload of hearty greens like kale? Blanch them and then pop them into the freezer for later use. (This doesn't work for delicate greens like lettuce.) You can also freeze bread, but keep it out of the fridge, which hastens staleness.

5 SALVAGE ITEMS ON THE EDGE

Hard cheese with a bit of mold is fine to eat as long as you cut away at least an inch around and below the spot. (Soft cheese with any mold that isn't a result of the manufacturing process should be discarded.) Use the same principle for firm veggies (cabbage, bell peppers, carrots) with small mold spots. You can also roast some veggies that become wrinkly, like bell peppers and tomatoes. Perk up wilted greens like lettuce and parsley by soaking them in ice water for a few minutes. Overripe fruit can be used in smoothies or homemade baked goods (or frozen for later).

CR'S EXPERT

Amy Keating
is a registered dietitian who oversees nutrition testing at CR.

ILLUSTRATION: CHRIS PHILPOT

On Your Mind

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

If I take a statin, do I still need to be concerned about high-cholesterol food?

Being attentive is wise. Statin users who follow a low-cholesterol, low-saturated-fat diet that's rich in produce, whole grains, good fats, and lean protein get better protection than they do with cholesterol-lowering drugs alone, says Leslie Cho, MD, section head of preventive cardiology and rehabilitation at the Cleveland Clinic. The same goes for people whose bodies absorb a lot of cholesterol from the small intestine or convert a lot of saturated fat into LDL ("bad") cholesterol. Even if you're not in one of those categories, eating right may prevent the need to increase your statin dosage in the future.

I get canker sores in my mouth and on my lips. What can I do?

You can encourage healing and ease the pain by rinsing your mouth with saltwater or applying ice to the area. Over-the-counter topical dental products and an analgesic like acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic) can help, too. If sores take 10 days or more to clear up, or you're in severe pain or have many sores, your doctor (or dentist) can prescribe a numbing ointment or topical steroid. They may want to check for deficiencies of vitamin B12, folate, or zinc, which can hike the risk of recurring sores. Easing stress and getting enough sleep can also help keep canker sores at bay.

Do I really need to stretch? If so, how often should I do it?

Stretching for a few minutes two or three times a week can help you move with less pain and more flexibility and make certain moves easier, like reaching down to lace up your sneakers or turning your head to check traffic. It may also reduce stress and help improve blood pressure, says Brian Cleven, a registered clinical exercise physiologist at Bellin Health Marinette in Marinette, Wis. The best time to stretch is after you've done a warmup. "This makes the muscle fibers and structures more receptive," he says. That could be after marching in place for a few minutes, or after a walk or doing household chores. For some safe and effective stretches, go to **CR.org/stretchwell**.

How can I make clipping my toenails easier?

If your toenails are thick and hard, gently file them regularly. Before cutting them, soak your feet in warm water or take a shower or bath, says Priya Parthasarathy, DPM, a podiatrist in Silver Spring, Md. You can also use a drugstore nail-softening cream. Cut toenails straight across to prevent ingrown nails. If you can't cut them yourself, your doctor or podiatrist can do it for you. You can also consider going to a trusted nail salon for a pedicure.

TALK TO US

HAVE QUESTIONS?
We'll answer those of general interest. Write to CRH, 101 Truman Ave., Yonkers, NY 10703 or go to **CR.org/crh** to contact us by email.

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- How to Handle Headaches
- Best Ways to Avoid Food Poisoning
- Is It a UTI or Something Else?